

HalfLife: My Story

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Summary: How many stories are in HalfLife? Approxamatley 6 billion. This the story of me. Only one in 6 billion, but what people in HalfLife these days can't afford to have is a sense of porportion...Chapter 10 up.

1. Average: Out of Context

Dust and dirt drifts over the rotting landscape and the rubble from former homes covers the bodies of family and comrades, the restless dead. The sun is blotched out from the black smoke that emanates from the towering factories that exist thousands of miles away, and the air is thick with the smell of blood and ruin. What the hell happened here, might you ask? The answer is in the question: Hell. Hell happened here, and hell continues to fester here. No one knows quite how it happened, or why, but what we do know is difficult to describe in words alone. A deafening bang erupted that echoed around the world, and reality seemed to shift and flash. That's when the creatures started appearing; no, not creatures, monsters. They started pouring out of the shadowy places, and sometimes just out of thin air. Giant man-devouring fish, reptilians with fangs as large as tabletops, bugs with the power of bulldozers, and horrible crabs that could latch onto you and suck all humanity from your soul, leaving you a walking corpse. But the worst that came from the abyss were not monsters, but intelligent life forms calling themselves the Combine. The Combine needed no introduction. The moment they appeared, they started taking over. They harnessed large gunships and tall walking tanks, and that's about all they needed. We resisted, of course, but it was nowhere near enough. Earth's military defenses were crushed within two hours. Our surrender was organized, humanity was placed in internment cities, and the Combine continued to run the world. Some of us, however, would not go. We resisted the call to relocate and stayed in and fortified our homes and neighborhoods with as many firearms and provisions as possible. There are many other people who went with the Combine into the cities and others that took a direct stand; but this is not their tale. This is our story, this is my story.

Most other teenagers around my age would do normal teenager activities. They'd go out to movies, shop at the mall, learn to drive, and play sports. I used to do all that. Now my main hobbies include blasting down headcrab zombies and taking out a Combine convoy every once and a while. My name is Mike Van Assche, and I am a human refugee in central Florida, a place where the Combine has not established a firm root. My family and I, along with many others in the surrounding town, stuck together after the United States fell apart. We all migrated into my home neighborhood and set up a base camp there, using some bulldozers that we stole to demolish the houses around us to be used as supplies, and to give us a better range of vision so we know of any Combine activity. With our bare hands we built a wall around our refuge point, and we gathered a sizeable militia of about 300 men and strong boys. Our little town held about 80 families, of which were fed and cared for by each other. Food was somewhat of a problem, because with the sun blotched out the way it was, crops were difficult to grow. However, we managed to get fresh meat by sending out groups of hunters to go find animals and bring them back. The new creatures that came about due to the strange bang that started this whole thing were plentiful, so we usually hunted them. But food is always the least of our worries. The fear of the Combine one day finding us here never did settle easily on our minds.

I strolled down my former front lawn, the dead grass crunching beneath my feet. I scanned the town, seeing the usual things: rocky ground, half demolished houses, families cuddled up under the few tarps we have for shade. I walked over to one of the ruined houses and sat down in a thoroughly destroyed armchair, trying to relax. Relaxation doesn't come easy these days, I thought to myself. And after this day, probably never will. I finger at the handgun in my pocket. Almost everyone who can use a gun responsibly is required to carry one around now. There's no telling when there might be a headcrab around that managed to sneak into the camp. Headcrabs may possibly be the most annoying thing in this new reality, I thought. Those small bugs just crawl around and suddenly jump at your head when you least expect it, latch on, and don't let go. And if you can't get the little bugger off within 30 minutes, well, lets just say that you're worse than dead. As I brooded my good buddy Blake came over to the ruins of the house and plopped down cross-legged next to me on the ground. "How's it goin'?" he asked me. "Well, let me recount..." I said, holding up my fingers. "One, there are freak monsters running around unchecked; two, I have no idea how my friends outside of this town are; three, alien bastards are trying to kill us; four, the world's gone to hell; and five, you are still wearing that retarded thing on your head." Blake put on a clearly fake stoic face and pointed at the headgear he was wearing. "This?" he asked. "This is an anti-headcrab hat. It'll protect me if a head-hopper tried to suck me into a zombie." I put on the flattest face I could manage. "Blake," I said. "It's a bike helmet."

"Even so," Blake said, crossing his arms. "A head-hopper's mouth isn't wide enough to fit over the bike helmet, so I think I'm safer than you are right now." I grinned. "Wanna go find a headcrab and find out?" I asked. Blake cringed. "Let's not than say we did, how's that?" he said. I smirked. "Amen."

Damned if I know how we have fun these days. Guess the only thing to do is talk and shoot things. "We got a couple zombies at point 2!"

yelled a watcher from the top of the wall at point 2. I answered the call, "Fast or slow?" The watcher paused for a moment. "Just a couple of slow movers; looks like they're migrating across the wastes somewhere." I got up off my seat and beckoned Blake to follow me. "I'm coming up," I said, jogging up to the point 2 ladder that took you up to the top of the wall. I climbed up to the peak, watching my hands on the rust. With so much blasted rust around, it's a miracle no one's gotten a case of tetanus yet. With medicine so hard to come by, sickness in this time was often rewarded with death. Once I was up, I turned around and helped Blake up onto the creaky platform. I turned to the watcher after looking out into the wastes of my homeland. "Where are they?" I asked, squinting through the humid air. "There," the watcher pointed. "They were just unlucky enough to stray this far to our camp." I saw them. The ghastly look of their blood stained clothes and the monstrous bug atop their cranium made them stand out amongst the dusty background. They ambled on slowly, dragging legs sometimes, which made them excellent target practice. I brought my gun out my pocket. "Bet you five poker chips that I could take this bastard down in three shots or less," I said to Blake, flicking the safety off of my gun. "You're on," Blake grinned, taking out his own weapon. Fire one! A missed shot, landed just behind one of the zombies. The creature didn't even know he was being fired at. Fire two! Ah, a fine hit. Not quite where I was aiming for, but still satisfactory. I had hoped for a headshot, which usually meant an instant kill, but instead I hit the chest area. The mindless beast flailed around, wondering what had hit him, and in his thrashing struck one of his traveling companions on the back. I couldn't help but laugh at the stupid creatures as the two zombies turned on each other and ripped each other to shreds. I smirked as I turned to Blake. "That'll be five poker chips, buddy. Keep this up and you won't be able to play cards with me tonight!" Blake stuck out his tongue at me. "Yeah, yeah, but how about this," he offered, clicking the safety off his gun. "If I can't take that last one down over there in one shot, you get my remaining chips, but if I succeed, I get double my chips back from you." I thought about this. Blake wasn't _that_ good of a shot, even if he did get lucky sometimes. Whatever, the world is a wasteland, so what's the problem in risking a couple of poker chips? "Sure. Deal." I said, slipping my gun back into my pocket with the safety on. "Here goes!" Blake whispered, taking careful aim. When he fired, the bullet streaked through the thick air like rocket. If you looked close enough, you could probably see an air trail. Unfortunately for me, the shot hit dead on. The headcrab on top of the zombie exploded, sending yellow entrails everywhere. "Shi-it!" I exclaimed, leaning forward. "Lucky shot, lucky shot!" Blake returned the smirk I gave him earlier. "Lucky or not," he said, "You owe me ten poker chips, and I expect those in my hands by tonight's game, yeh hear?" I made an annoying sound with my lips. "Yeah, I got it." The thing that astonished me, though, was how he ever managed to hit that target. The kid had barley ever touched a gun in his life, and he did something that I usually don't do, heck, that many people don't accomplish! Nothing to worry about, I supposed. Blake has his overly fair share of luck now and again. A loud, commanding, and shrewd voice rang from the bottom of the ladder, knocking me out of my thought process. "Hey, you dumb kids up there! What the hell is going on? What's all the shooting about?" Oh, no, not him, not now! My head really doesn't need this kind of thing right now!

"Yes, father, what do you want?" I responded to the call, watching Blake quickly stow his gun in his pocket. "What's with all the damn

shooting?" my dad yelled up at us. "There were zombies near the camp, dad! What did you want us to do, let them go?" I said to him.

"Jesus, what took you so long?" he mocked, the slightest hint of laughter forming in his voice. "Don't dick around when dispatching zombies, take em' down fast! Do you need target lessons?" Now he was just being an ass.

"No, I'm good. Really."

"Alright then, just keep up the good work then," he said, walking away. I swear to God, my dad is the most cynical bastard around. But for being so sarcastic, you have to hand it to him, he gets the job done. At 55 years of age, he is still the strongest man in the whole damn camp, and is kind of the head of the site, a supervisor, so to speak. During the construction of our home, we were at a loss for a leader figure, until my father got tired of the arguing and took it upon himself to lead the camp's construction. After the camp was completed, the authority never left him. The people of the refuge point didn't mind; in fact, they liked him, something which came to my surprise, as I knew my father as 'Difficult to Work With'.

Blake waited a few moments after my dad had left before he spoke. "Man, your dad is scaryâ€¦" he said, almost afraid that my dad may hear him and kill him. That's Blake for you, he can be tough when the times are, but a really pansy at heart, at least when it came to my dad. But then again, lots of people are afraid of my father, for obvious reasons. He is very large, and with his reddish skin and booming voice, he is reminiscent of some kind of demon.

"Yeah, I get that a lot," I replied. "So, anyway, how do you think this all started?" Blake gave me an odd look, probably about the stark change in subject, but answered anyway. "You know, I have absolutely no idea," he said blatantly. Mildly surprising. He continued, "I know I would usually come up with some kind of crazy idea of what happened, could have happened, or what I know did, but truly, I have no clue." I remembered a rumor I had heard from a traveler we had let in a couple days ago just then. "I heard that this whole deal was a result of a portal explosion in a research lab in Nevada somewhere," I said, regurgitating what I had heeded from the traveler. "No shit?" Blake asked, leaning back against the wall. "Like Area 51 or something?"

"Naw, not 51. It was something like Blackâ€¦ Black Spider? Black Mace Labs? Ah well, the Black something Labs. Anyways, that sounds kind of far fetched to me."

"Yeah," said Blake. "I think that the ability to open up portals is something beyond our science."

"Yeah, me too," I agreed. But I knew I was lying to myself. Hell, if I turned around and jumped off this wall right here, I wouldn't be half surprised if I started flying. In this new crazy day in history, I wasn't sure if everything was possible, or if anything was possible.

Nothing made sense anymore.

2. Guarded by Fear

Things continued on that day very usually. Nothing too interesting going on in the afternoon, and the usual evening poker game, and then to bed for me. I turned away from the fire, trying to get some good shuteye. Little did I know that I would need sleep that night more than ever, because it would be my last night sleeping in this camp.

Not softly do the drums of war sound.

A distant voice called to me, telling me something. All sound was muffled, and I couldn't hear what the person was saying. I felt myself being shaken, and someone telling me to get up. "Mwhammâ€|" I made a noise. "Just 5 more minutes, pleaseâ€|" I rolled over and pushed the person's arms away. Apparently they got annoyed, because their next move was slapping me in the freaking face. I yelped, jumping up, becoming notably aware of my surroundings. When I find out who the bastard was that slapped me, there would be some Hell to pay! "Mike!" yelled the person whom I heard in my sleep. I turned to see Blake crouching next to my slumber area, fear alive in his eyes. "Blake, what the hell is going on? What's wrong?" I prepared to hear the worst from him. I braced myself for the answer.

"It's the Combine. They've found us."

It was too much. I reeled back, clutching my chest. "What?" I yelled. Blake grabbed my shoulders and shook me. "Calm down!" he yelled back at me. I shook him off, my face grim with anger. What the hell was wrong with this kid? "Calm?" I asked him. "The damn Combine have come to kill us all, and you want me to be calm?"

"Damn it, Mike! Shut it for one second!" Blake yelled. I shut it, hoping what he had to say was important. "You need to go down to the armory to gear up. We're fighting."

Holy shit, this is big.

I gave him a weak, breathless nod, and then hopped out of my makeshift bed. As I swiftly changed myself into my combat clothes, I thought. Damn! So they're finally here. I never thought this day would comeâ€|

No, that was another lie.

I knew this day would come, I knew it all along. I just feared it. I feared it until I managed to put it into a vault in my brain under lock and key, where I fooled myself into thinking that the Combine wouldn't come, that they would just go away. Well, now this day is come, and there is no more hiding, fearing, or fooling. Today, we're gonna fight.

I should have gone directly to the armory after I had gotten dressed. Should have, but didn't. There was one thing that I needed to get first. I rushed into the remains of my old home, and ran up to my room. I frantically began tearing out the drawers of my dresser, looking for something. Come on, it's here somewhereâ€| it has to beâ€|

Aha! I found the item, two items, actually, that I was looking for

and stuffed them into my pockets. The two items were the only left of any value to me: my two favorite medals I had won while on my crew team. God was with me when I won those medals, and I prayed that God was still with me now. And anyway, if we lost here, no Combine scum is touching my precious medals.

I rushed out of my house and sprinted to the armory, which was an old shed near the center of the camp. I flung open the door and dived at whatever weapon I could. An extra pistol and a .22 hunting rifle for me, just because that was all that was left. I grabbed one of the few remaining flak jackets and was about to take off when I noticed my old wood-cutting axe in the corner of the shed. I thought about it. Yeah, take it. Those bastards deserve much worse. I slung the axe across my back and took off to the front lines at Point 1. I climbed the ladder as fast as I could, hopped up on the platform, and looked out into the wastes.

Oh my Lord.

There were at least a hundred of them. Scratch a hundred, two hundred, more like. All coming at us like ants to a picnic. They weren't alone, either. They brought tanks. Tanks with a single machine gun turret on the top and the capability to launch rockets like madness. They were Combine APCs, and there were at least 8 of them.

Dear God and it didn't stop at the damn tanks.

They had one air unit, a lone Combine gunship flying overhead. It looked almost like a giant flying manatee, but there was no time to describe it, it was going to overtake us in seconds. "Get down!" the man next to me screamed. "GET DOWN!" everyone obeyed, and to good reason. The first volley of those blue streaking combine bullets tore through our concrete and wood defenses, leaving car-sized gnashes in our hard work. These sons of bitches need to be taught a lesson in humility. "Let em' have it!" I yelled, pointing my rifle to the sky. I fired several times, hitting on the mark. It wasn't a very hard target to miss. With horror, I realized that bullets were not doing a damn thing to that flying beast, even with everyone shooting at it. "Oh shit!" the man next to me yelled again. "INCOMING!" I turned to face the incoming soldiers, and my eyes bulged.

Rockets. 5 of them.

My mind couldn't think.

"Glory be to the Father," I began to pray. The rockets inched closer.

"To the Son," Closer.

"To the Holy Spirit," Closer still.

Time seemed to slow, and turned my back to the death canisters coming at me.

"As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end,"

With tears of fear in my eyes, I leaped off the Point 1

wall.

"Amenâ€¦" I whispered.

3. Why are we Forsaken?

I've been told that the lights you see when you're near death are just nerve endings flaring in the back of your head, but nerve endings could never emulate the things I saw. I swear that I saw angels in a bright light, and heavenly voices calling to me. Had peace reached me? Was I dead?

The voices instantly left me, and were replaced by yells and screams, and the heavenly light and the angels were replaced by black smoke and soldiers. No, I was still alive, and still in the same Hell that I had not gotten used to seeing.

I lied there on the ground for a while, not wanting to move. I touched my face because it felt hot and wet, and realized that my forehead had a huge cut on it, and that it was bleeding profusely. The first, but not the last, injury I would sustain in this war.

'Damn those bastards!' I thought, remembering what had happened. I rolled up off the ground and crouched, looking to where Point 1 wall was, or better yet, used to be. The rockets had completely blown away that side of the fort, leaving a gaping hole for the Combine to come rushing through.

"Mike!" someone yelled at me. "Mike! Holy Jesus man, are you alright?" Blake came running over and dropped on his knees next to me, helping me up. "I'm fine, I'm fine," I protested, hardly true. "Just a scratchâ€¦" Blake looked around. "Where's your weapon?" he asked. I looked around for my .22 rifle, but finding nothing but rubble. "Must've got blown away in the explosion," I said. "Don't worry, I've got spares," I told him, taking out one of my pistols and flicking off the safety. "Be prepared to use it," he told me. "The soldiers are going to be coming through that hole any second. We need to find some cover here!"

>Just as he said it, Combine soldiers came running through the former wall, their SMGs blazing. "Run!" Blake yelled, yanking me up. We sprinted like lightning and dived behind a chunk of concrete, with bullets bouncing every which way. Somewhere out there, I heard my dad's booming voice yell, "Let loose!" Refugees that I had not seen before popped out from behind rocks and ditches of their own and returned fire, determined to keep the Combine from getting through that hole. Several Combine fell, and the rest dived for cover. "Yeah!" I yelled, feeling the adrenaline rush through me. I raised my own gun, adding my bullets to the counter-attack. For a couple seconds I thought we had a chance at winning; but just for a couple seconds. Reality came down from the sky, along with that gunship. It opened fire on our ranks, and those who didn't have a considerably good cover were torn to pieces. I ducked back under the concrete rock and reloaded my pistol. "Damn it!" I cursed. "That gunship is screwing us over out here! We need to take that thing down!" Blake ducked next to me and yelled in my ear over the gunshots, "We can't! Bullets don't hurt it!"<p>

"Do we have any explosives?" I asked, hoping we had something to take

it down with.

Blake answered with what I hoped he wouldn't.

"No, we don't!"

I bit my lip. This is going to be very, very, ugly. I looked back over to the Combine soldiers and I saw something that made me want to pray again. The APCs were with them now. "Their tanks are with them!" I yelled. I ducked down next to Blake and spoke quickly, "Blake, we have to get out of here!" Blake shot his gun several times and then crouched down to speak to me. "Why?" he asked, reloading. "I don't want to get blown up, that's why!" I yelled at him.

"If we fall back, those soldiers are going to mow us down, not to mention that damn gunship!" he yelled back. He went up shoot again. Something he saw up there made him duck, covering his ears.

"DOWN!" he screamed. A second later, I painfully understood. A rocket from the APCs crashed right into the ditch next to us, blowing it and everyone inside it to smithereens. The noise of the rocket and the screams of the nearby refugees forced me to clap my hands over my head in agony. If this is what war was truly like, I wanted no part in it.

"Okay, let's fall back!" Blake quickly agreed, disregarding what he had said before. I nodded to him, and we jumped out from behind our cover and ran for the second defensive line, which was about 150 feet behind the first one. Now that we were out of our cover, I was able to quickly see the whole picture: the bodies of my friends and fellow refugees were strewn all over the ground, and the Combine were still pushing forward, overwhelming the front lines. Many others in the ditches next to us were following suite, and running for better safety. Many of them were not as successful as we were, getting shot in the back on the way, tripping over and getting blasted, or just getting killed by the gunship that was still hovering overhead. Blake and I dived over the shabby defensive wall that was built to fire behind and fell right into a very wide trench, big enough for five men to sleep comfortably in, lengthwise. Only a couple more refugees hopped over the wall behind us. I looked around and shook my head with distain. "So few..." I whispered. They had already dwindled our numbers down so much, and we were running out of ammunition. In my heart and mind, I knew that we would never last. Our camp would be overrun in matter of minutes.

4. Dethroned King

As the militia's ranks thinned, so did our ammunition. Shots fired at the Combine were soon scarce, and then ceased all together. Slowly, the Combine soldiers came out of their hiding place and began to advance. Being mindful of the gunship keeping tabs on us, our militia prepared to strike when the Combine was fully exposed.

"Wait for them..." I heard someone say, almost in a whisper, a few ranks away. "Hold..."

Suddenly, and quite unexpectedly, the Combine troops burst into a full sprint on our position, blasting their SMGs liberally, some chucking grenades.

"Fire! Now, now, now!" my dad yelled, blasting his gun into the wall of soldiers approaching us. I snapped my trigger several times, barely bothering to aim. With all the enemies coming at us, I was bound to hit something. Many soldiers fell, but many more kept coming. There was no end to the wave that was about to crash upon a very flimsy dam that was our militia. The Combine were within close range in a matter of seconds, blasting away our own men with their rampant gunfire. The man next to me erupted in a flash of blood and fell to the ground, dead as a dead could get. I quickly dispatched the Combine that appeared, and avenged my comrade's death.

'What the hell are they doing?' I thought frantically. 'Why are they charging?' There was no time to think about it, because more Combine were jumping over into our long trench and blasting the living Hell out of everyone. One soldier jumped over and landed right in front of me. I raised my pistol at the exact same time he raised his SMG.

He pulled his trigger first.

However, dear luck saved me that day from being a rotting paperweight. Instead of a bang coming of his weapon, a series of clicks sprung forth.

Unfortunately, luck has a funny way of turning around and screwing you.

As I pulled my trigger, a click came from my gun as well. We were both out of ammo. The soldier reached for another magazine to fill his weapon, but I had a backup weapon, well, on my back. I forcefully swung my woodcutting axe off my back, using my shoulder as leverage, and smashed it blade-first into the Combine bastard's head. I saw no blood, but a muffled screech told me I did some damage, and the soldier collapsed in a heap on the blood-stained ground. I tried to get my axe out of the soldier's head, but it was stuck in his armored helmet-mask. Yet another soldier jumped over into the trench and faced me, and poor me, with no weapons, did the only thing I could think of: I put up my dukes and gestured for the soldier to bring it. I could almost see the sneer behind his mask, as he put down his gun and drew out a different device. It looked like some kind of nightstick, but then the soldier gave it a little flick of the wrist and the end lit up with a zapping kind of noise. He charged me, and I put up my arms in defense.

I was unprepared for the shock that was delivered next.

Quite literally, a shock. The soldier delivered a swift and decisive blow to my arms, and it felt like I had just grasped on to both ends of a running car battery.

The next hit caught me dead in the face.

I reeled back in pain. Everything was spinning, all color was distorted, and it felt like my face has been lying on a boiling frying pan for an hour or so. I closed my left eye to ease the pain, then put my first up again, once more telling the soldier to "Show me what he has". The Combine soldier charged again, but this time I was ready. I caught his glowy-stick in mid-swing and used all of my strength to force it back down onto his own mask, right to where the eyepiece is, and I held it there for as long as I could. I was also

shocked by what happened next, but in a different context than before.

I would have held the shock-stick to the soldier's face a bit longer, but I noticed out of the corner of my eye the gunship hovering overhead. I could hear a slight whirring coming from the tip of the head, where the gun was located. Something bad was about to happen, I knew; something bad that I didn't want to get caught in.

I was right. The gun on the head of the gunship opened fire in the ditch, and I dived out of the way just in time. The soldier that I fried with his own shock stick, however, was torn to shreds by his own gunship.

"Jesus!" I whispered to myself. "These guys don't care if they kill their own boys! Those scumbags!" I leaned against the wall of the trench to catch my breath for a few seconds, and analyzed the situation: Blake was close to me, blowing a hole into every Combine that got remotely near him, random Militia were either killing Combine or getting killed by Combine, and my dad

My father had lured a Combine soldier into a fistfight just as I had done, but my dad was definitely a better boxer than I.

"Come on, you little fucker," he taunted, raising his fists. The soldier charged him with the same kind of glowing stick that I was assaulted with, but my dad's fists were faster. Before the soldier knew what had hit him, he had been hit 3 times in the mask. On the fourth blow, the soldier's mask broke off completely, and he was KO'ed.

"Is that all? Come on, I'm a 55 year old man!" my dad laughed.

He spoke much, much too soon.

A Combine soldier appeared at the top of the trench behind him and fired several times, striking my father in the back, and the bullets going all the way through.

"No!" I yelled, running over to him.

My dad crumpled to the ground, his old bones finding rest at last. He was dead before he hit the ground.

5. Hastened Exodus

My mind barley could barley comprehend what had just happened. My father was the most influential man I knew; I believed him to be infallible, indestructible. It turned out he was as mortal as the rest of us.

"Dad!" I screamed, reaching him just when the bastard soldier that had killed him jumped down into the ditch. I bent over and picked up an SMG dropped by one of the Combine and with a savage war yell I emptied the entire weapon into the soldier's face, watching with grim satisfaction as the bullets tore through his mask and out the back of his skull. No mercy for them. I knelt down next to my father, feeling his face, finding it colder than a slab of marble. If my eyes weren't so dry from the fighting, I would have cried. Another militia fighter

knelt next to me, examining my father.

"Fredrick has fallen!" I whispered. The soldier nodded.

"Aye," he said. "We are losing this fight. Our ammo supply is low, and the Combine have many reinforcements and armor on hand." Being my father's son, I gave the only order I thought was proper at the current time.

"Order all of our Militia to evacuate. We run for the lots and drive our way out of here."

"But-" the man started to argue.

"Do it!" I growled. "We can't win! Throw cocktails to hold them off! Now!" The man nodded shakily and ran off yelling into the air, "Make for the lots! Make for the lots! Evacuate!" I felt like lying down and dying with my dad, but somehow I knew that's not what he would want. Instead, I picked him up and carried him like a wounded man, hoisting him out of the ditch on the opposite side of where the Combine was charging from. I made out the figure of Blake coming at me through the dust and smoke. When he spotted my father lying in his own blood, he cursed loudly under his breath.

"I'm sorry, man!" was all he could choke out.

"Just help me," I growled. Blake didn't ask any questions as he hoisted my dad onto his shoulder with me. As we were making for the lots, where all of our vehicles were located, an explosion erupted behind us, and as did agonized screams.

"Good, they've thrown the Molotov Cocktails," I said. "That will hold the Combine while we escape." We made it to the lots with little opposition, but also with so few families. Out of the 300 militia we had, only about 100 remained.

"Get into the cars!" I yelled. "Flee!" I didn't need to repeat myself. Everyone ran like scattered ants into the vehicles and started them up, some not waiting for others and just driving right out into the wastes. I set my father in the backseat of an old and battered Honda with a broken sunroof, and climbed in the driver's seat.

"Great, a stick!" I muttered, fiddling with the stick shift as Blake jumped in the passenger's seat.

"What, humor?" he questioned, to which I simply shrugged. I didn't start the car; Instead, I looked around the crowds of people gathering into cars. Blake followed my gaze and caught up on what I was thinking.

"Don't worry," he said, resting a hand on my shoulder. "The rest of our families are already gone. They fled a couple of minutes ago together." I nodded apprehensively.

"Of course," I said. I started the car and revved the engine, just to make sure this pile of junk would make it out of the Combine's reach. Unfortunately, I had made another mistake regarding the Combine's power. Another explosion erupted behind us as several of the vehicles in the back of the lot exploded.

'_How could have I forgotten about those Goddamned tanks!' _I thought. "Hold on!" I floored the gas, blasting out of the lot and into the wastes of my former home. Dust billowed out from behind the wheels of the car I was driving. I caught up to the group of about 25 cars, which were all rampaging across the wastes to who knows where. I breathed a sigh of relief, thinking that we were away from the danger.

Of course, I was wrong again.

The car driving next to mine burst into a flash of flame and light, sending suffered screams echoing across the dusty plains. The Combine APCs were perusing us, intent on making sure none of us survived.

"I fucking hate those things," I yelled to the world, jerking the wheel in order to avoid a second missile. "Blake! Tell me which way to turn! I can't see anything!" Blake stuck his head out the sunroof and yelled me directions based on where the tank's missiles were being fired.

"Left! Right! More right! Look out! Left! Left! _Your other left!_"

The ground flared next to me.

"Whoa!" I exclaimed, jerking the wheel again. "We can't hold like this!" Blake was silent. "Blake?" I asked tentatively. Suddenly, one of the tanks trailing us was blown into smithereens by some unseen force.

"What in the world is going on up there?" I yelled, trying to see behind me.

"There are jeeps!" Blake hollered excitedly. "They're shooting rockets at the tanks! We're saved!" I looked out my side window to see a small buggy with two men in it: one driving, and the other sporting a large shoulder rocket-launcher. The jeep drove out of my view just as the man propelled a rocket, destroying another of the tanks following us. Thrilled families and militia gave shouts and whistles from their cars as the Combine armor was disintegrated in minutes. I rested my forehead on the steering wheel of the car and let big, wet tears fall down my face. We were finally safe.

6. Graves and Oaths

The strangers led us back to their headquarters, which was situated in a heavily fortified college campus that took about an hour to reach even with our vehicles. They identified themselves as the Resistance, a leading rebellion force against the Combine. We were welcomed at their base with open arms, and they kindly housed all of our refugees and tended to our sick and wounded. Despite the safe housing, no one slept that night, preoccupied with mourning for their lost friends and family. Many people could be heard whispering prayers in the solitude of their own rooms, the quiet lamentations for the lost dead. I, on the other hand, wandered ventured out into the campus with my father's body, on my way to a sectioned off area that the Resistance used as a graveyard. When I found it, I found two solid planks of wood and a length of ruined rope and set to work. I

had purposely not asked anyone for tool, because I wanted to be completely alone in the endeavor; I would bury my father with my bare hands if I had to. I dug a hole using one of the planks, and gently laid my dad down to rest. Words do not describe how difficult it was to actually spread the dirt on his body, knowing that I would never see his stern face ever again, nor hear his sarcastic mockery of the world as it was. My knees were shaking violently by the time I managed to tie the two planks together to form a cross and stick it in the ground behind my dad's grave. When I solemnly stepped back to survey my work, a new wave of grief swept my body, and I fell to my knees.

I had always promised myself that I wouldn't cry when my father died, that I would be glad when he was gone, and that I would finally get some of my inheritance. Now that the day had come, I saw that I had been an incredibly selfish bastard. I couldn't even hold back the wails that I let out, flushing the ground with enough tears to grow corn with.

"Dadâ€¦ daddyâ€¦" I reverted back to the days when I called him childish names, wishing to Heaven and Hell alike that those days were still real. I thought this was all a dream, it had to beâ€¦ Soon I would wake up in my bed and everything would be peaceful and calm again. I closed my eyes and wept until my mouth felt dry, and when I could cry no more, I started making harsh oaths, cursing whomever I could for this horrible atrocity. That moment, that precise minute, I decided.

"Every single one of those Combine bastards will dieâ€¦" I growled, breathing heavily enough to crush metal. "They will all sufferâ€¦ I will skin them alive and burn their bodies to ashes!" My rage blinded my better judgment, but I didn't care. If they wanted to throw their God-damned lemons at me, I would throw them back. Screw the pie. "If they want to see me dead, then I will be known in their records as their slayer! I will make my name feared to be whispered among their greatest leaders! They pushed me into a fight, and now they're gonna get one." I stood up and bowed to the cross and swiftly walked off to my assigned dorm, leaving my father's grave with a black heart and a fiery mind.

7. Am I a Martyr?

The next day reeked of melancholy, people everywhere were depressed, but I noted quite a few with a vengeful fire in their eyes.

"Good," I said to myself. "At least I'm not going out there alone." I spotted Blake out of the corner of my eye, sitting on the doorstep of a ruined dorm, intently cleaning a handgun. I shakily took a breath. People here were still recovering, but I had to talk to someone. I walked over to him and he, spotting me, quickly closed the clip of the gun and stuffed it into the back belt of his jeans, not bothering to flick the safety on.

"Listen man," he began. He tried to speak again, but a dull croak left his throat instead of words. Taking a deep swallow, he tried again, but he averted his eyes and his voice lost its confidence it had before. "Iâ€¦ I'm sorry about your dadâ€¦" he said. "He was a good man." I was unsure of what to respond with, so I answered with a simple "Thanks." After an appropriate pause, I asked,

"How's your family?"

"We're fine. My sisters are a bit shaken, but that's to be expected, you know?"

I nodded. "Yeah." The gate that led out into the scorching wastes was visible from where we stood, its guard towers standing vigilantly, keeping watch. I narrowed my eyes, trying to wonder what the world was like now, if there was anything left besides what we had.

"I'm going back out there," I said. The statement took Blake by surprised.

"What?"

"I'm going to go back out there. I'm sick and tired of this world, Blake. I want to change it. I'm sick and tired of just trying to survive, waiting for the Combine to find us. I'm not going to wait anymore." Blake looked troubled by this.

"But you can stay here and help," he said. "You can help the resistance by helping here, and this base. You don't need to go out there!"

"I told you, I am sick of this shit. I want to bring the fight to the Combine, and I want to experience the results." Blake stood up.

"If you go out there, you'll be killed!" I sighed and looked him straight in the face, no tricks.

"Then I will die."

Blake swallowed hard again, and sat back down. "I just don't want to see you die, man," he said. "We've already lost our homes, many of us have already lost our families. I don't want to lose my friend." I sat down next to him and gave him a brotherly hug.

"You won't," I said. "There are other survivors, Blake, and I'm going to bring them back. I am going to hurt the Combine in the same way they hurt me."

"Please don't be a hero, Mike," Blake said. "Heroes die."

I lowered my head, taking another deep breath. Truthfully, being a hero didn't sound all that bad, but I didn't want to be a hero. "I don't want to be a hero," I told him. "I want to be a soldier." Blake's eyes started to water, find the hidden truth that I had already found in my words.

"Soldiers die too."

Silently, I began to cry with him. I didn't want to die, nor did I want to leave the camp behind. But there was something raging within me that said I had to do this.

"I know," I said.

After my chat with Blake I couldn't bring myself to face him the next day as I walked across the parched grounds to the main office building, the most heavily fortified building on the campus. I was looking to talk to a recruitment officer there named Corporal Durgen who may be able to put me into service of the Resistance. As I walked up the steps to the large door that led into the main hall, an armed rebel stepped in front of me, blocking my path.

"What business do you have here?" he asked me sharply. I couldn't help but be slightly intimidated.

"I've come to talk to Corporal Durgen about joining the Resistance's armed forces," I said. The soldier looked at me funny.

"You might be a little young to be fighting actively, don't you think?" I gritted my teeth.

"I want to fight," I stated harshly, maybe even too harshly. The soldier chuckled.

"I can't let you see the Corporal on just that. Besides, he's not in right now. You can try again later, but you still may not get in," he said, shrugging. I frowned unhappily. I wanted to fight the Combine, but doing it without the Resistance backing me was a stupid idea. As I turned to leave I heard a gruff voice say,

"What's going on here? Who is this kid?" I saw that the voice belonged to a grumpy-looking man with bulging arms and a loosely kept goatee. There was the beginning of a white scar poking out of his shirt at the base of his neck, which I was sure went a good way down his chest. As he approached, the rebel blocking the door saluted.

"Corporal!" he shouted. I examined the man.

'So this is Corporal Durgenâ€¦' I thought. 'Impressive.'

"Who're you?" Durgen asked me, eyeing me down. I stood up straight, giving the best commanding air I could manage.

"Corporal, sir! I'm here because I wish to join the armed forces and fight with the Resistance!" I had hoped my proposal hadn't seemed ridiculous, but hopes are usually ill received. Durgen threw his head back and let out a guffaw.

"You? In the armed forces? Ha! Barley looks like your damn balls have dropped! Go home, kid. The force is not a place for children." I flushed red with anger at Durgen's response.

"I want to fight!" I growled at him. "I've done it before! Just tell me what to do or who to kill and I'll do it!" The Corporal sneered at me.

"From what I've heard, your experience in this field involved your little camp getting overrun by a Combine troop. Not very impressive, by my standards." I had to restrain myself in attacking the Corporal.

"Just tell me what to do and I'll do it," I repeated. Durgen smirked,

but this time it was a thoughtful expression.

"Okay," he said. "Here. I want you to go out into the wastes and rescue as many people you can find. If you come across any Combine, kill them and take their badges as proof of your kill. Come back in a couple days alive and impress me with your job, then I'll let you join the armed forces." I narrowed my eyes at the Corporal. Something told me that he didn't expect me to come back. "Also," he added, "take this to the armory." He scribbled something onto a sheet of paper he pulled from his vest pocket. "This note will let you take some weapons from our stash and let you take one vehicle for transportation." He smiled at me again. "You leave tomorrow." I looked at the note for a moment, and then decided that this was the only way to do this.

"Alright," I said, grasping the note from him. "I'll do it." I saluted him again, but in a less serious and more mocking manner than before.

"Good day, Corporal," I said as I strutted past him.

9. Rolling Out

I prepared to leave early the next morning. Using the note that Durgen gave me, I was able to take a couple weapons from the base's armory. I packed light, taking only a semiautomatic rifle and pistol sidearm. I grabbed a medical kit, flashlight, radio, and ammo supplements while I was there. I also presented Durgen's note to the guards at the base's lot, and they allowed me to choose one vehicle to take. I chose to take an old but sturdy Ford truck that could be used to haul people in the back. I didn't stop to speak to anyone on my out. The pain of leaving my friends and the possibility of not coming back would be too much for me to handle. I set out like this, all my supplies in the passenger seat beside me. I had some idea of where I was going; I knew the big city would be a bad choice to start, because the Combine had probably used force and troops to capture rather than destroy that area, making it enemy territory. I decided instead to start in the suburbs, a place where people may still be hiding out, like the way I did. I decided to start with areas I know: the large and newly completed mini-town of Baldwin Park would be my best (and probably, safest) bet of finding survivors and refugees. I drove off into the dusty limestone wastes in order to save those still out there, and almost more importantly, prove myself to the blasted Corporal.

My initial ride to Baldwin Park was uneventful. I drove hastily along suburb road, but nothing came out of the dark houses to meet me. Everyone here must have evacuated, or fallen victim to worse things, already. Those worse things mentioned above did not stir to bother me either, whether or not that was because they feared my car or that they just weren't interested I didn't know. As I approached the Park, I had to swerve out of the way of huge canisters that had carved chunks out of the asphalt of the road. The canisters looked like large rockets, but strangely, the back was blown off instead of the actual body exploding like a normal rocket. I eyed these canisters carefully, wondering if they might still be volatile. After passing many, I concluded that they must serve some other purpose than to destroy landscapes. It was getting around mid-morning by the time I had gotten into the first outskirts of the Park, and I had still seen

very few signs of life. It was extremely unnerving. I pulled up to a closed garage door and got out of my truck, thinking that this would be a good place to set up a base camp. The garage door was heavy, but the automatic mechanism that pulls the door up electronically was broken, so I managed to swing the door up with a little effort. At that moment I realized with a sickening churn of my stomach why I had not seen any life in this town. In the dark garage, its bile reflecting off the morning sun, was a withering headcrab zombie. Its ghastly head turned toward me when I opened the door, arms outstretched. It began to shriek in an almost human like voice. I swore that the human left in that zombie was screaming out for a merciful death, while the headcrab was growling out to feed on sickly flesh. I pushed my hand down to grab a gun, but I remembered I had left my supplies in the passenger seat of the car. Of all the damn foolish things to do! The zombie lurched toward me and dived, but I managed to throw my weight onto the hood of the truck, barley dodging the sharp claw of hand that wanted to introduce itself to my neck. I hurled myself over the car to the other side and flung open the door and snatched the pistol out from the seat. I cocked it and pointed it over the hood of the truck just as the zombie stood up again to lash out. Without hesitation I pumped 3 shots into its head. With an inhuman shriek, the whole zombie collapsed to the ground in a heap, green alien blood mixing with the crimson blood of man. I exhaled a long sigh and put the gun down. After a couple seconds, I realized my situation. What other creatures had heard the scuffle? How long until they came to investigate? I jumped over the hood again and examined the body. I searched the pockets for anything useful, and found a ring of keys and a wallet. I took the keys for their necessity, and the wallet for the hell of it. I pocketed both items and dragged the body to the other side of the street, away from my base camp. I nearly vomited due to the reeking stench, but resisted the urge. I had limited time before other zombies turned up. I hastily pulled my truck into the garage and closed the heavy door behind me. At once I realized my mistake. I put my gun up in readiness. I only saw one zombie in this garage, but there may be other headcrabs! Fortunately, my suspicions were vain; a full sweep of every nook and cranny of the garage failed to turn up anything alien. I worked quickly, but silently, to move anything heavy against the door of the garage, to keep anything outside from opening it. I surveyed my base one last time, and named it secure. "Now," I said to myself, finding my voice rather shaky and cold. "It's time to lay low and plan my next move."

10. The Storyteller

For the next hour I set myself to work with some filler jobs in order to keep my mind occupied. I moved boxes around my new base garage and searched for anything that might have helped me. What I was really doing, however, was trying to keep busy enough to ignore the sounds of moaning and stumbling outside the garage, the zombies feeding on one of their former own. I happened to open the wallet I had found on the body and reviewed its contents. I found some cash, a credit card, and an I.D. It had belonged to a man named John Giddings.

It was funny, I thought, that I should know this information. I did not know this man, and I did not care about him. But sitting there in that musty garage, I found myself mourning his death. Well, not so much his death, for the man was dead when I met him. This man, Giddings, had a story. That story was ended the moment I shot him in

the head. And to think, there are other stories out there, some good, and some bad. Giddings and others like him had the bad stories, the nightmares, ones that people want to end and have nothing to do with. In order for my story to live, I realized, their stories had to end. I could still hear the shuffling of the walking nightmares outside the garage, and I smirked to myself. Those bad dreams had to be brought to a close, and my story was going to be the one to do it.

"And," I said, throwing the I.D. over to the corner of the garage, "Giddings rested in peace happily ever after, the end."

End
file.